Speculative zoology

DARREN NAISH argues that cryptozoologists have failed to provide evidence for their putative unknown creatures – but perhaps there's another approach...

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At a Weird Weekend talk delivered in the backroom of a pub called the *Cowick Barton*, my plan was to eject a slide featuring the front cover of Meurger and Gagnon's classic *Lake Monster Traditions* from the projector before vigorously stamping it to bits on the floor. Cryptozoologist Richard Freeman was going to leap to the fore and help me out. And, yes, *slides* and *slide projectors* – you know that I'm talking about something that happened a long, long time ago. The dislike that some cryptozoological literalists had (and have) for Michel Meurger and his colleagues reflects a battle that's occurred for years behind the scenes in the world of mystery animal research, one in which each side sees the other as woefully naive and hopelessly misguided. Herein lies part of the backstory to the *Cryptozoologicon*, a book that I published with John Conway and Memo Kosemen in 2013 [1] and which has received both praise and scorn, albeit in unequal measure. We liked what Meurger had to say, [2] but we were inspired by other events to approach cryptozoology from an altogether different direction.

As a much younger person, I became interested in cryptozoology because I believed that the eyewitness accounts of the literature described encounters with real unknown animals – animals that represented unknown species that were spectacular in form, size, or significance. I hold out hope that new, large animal species might prove to be the explanation for certain sea monster reports, mystery primate reports, or whatever; many of us do.

But having engaged on a long and meandering trip that's led me to where I am now, I think that Meurger and colleagues were mostly right: that cryptozoology has more to do with a mythified, cultural view of the world, and how people interpret and misinterpret the world around them, than it does with the flesh-and-blood cryptozoological literalism promoted by Bernard Heuvelmans and his followers. Investigations of many of the classic tales of eyewitnesses and stories-passed-down-since-the-dawn-of-time have shown that most are wanting, corrupted, or so suspicious that they should be discarded. [3] The evolutionary scenarios and cryptid identities that cryptozoologists have favoured are almost wholly based on incorrect ideas that were otherwise thrown out decades ago. [4] And cryptid hunters have been outstandingly good at providing an overwhelming absence of evidence for the mystery creatures they seek. An enormous body of research has also shown that people are terrible eyewitnesses [5] – the takehome being that any field based predominantly on accepting eyewitness testimony at its word is on fatally shaky ground.

The key epiphany came from an endeavour not traditionally associated with cryptozoology: speculative zoology, the imaginative field in which people invent creatures from hypothetical timelines, alternative evolutionary trajectories and 'what if?' scenarios. In 2012, John, Memo and I published *All Yesterdays*, a book devoted to the idea that long-extinct animals might (in some cases) have looked very different from traditional depictions, and might also (in some cases) have engaged in behaviours that we might consider absurd, or even not (ordinarily) consider at all. [6] A long-standing interest in the writings of Dougal Dixon and other spec zoo visionaries meant that we were familiar with the fictional creatures of the speculative literature, and already versed in producing our own (see Memo's *Snaiad* project, and my own *Squamozoic*).

BELOW: What do speculative creatures – in this case future animals from Dougal Dixon's 1981 book *After Man* – have in common with cryptids? Well, a lot.

Cryptozoologists have done so much more than collect sightings and sort them into sets for analysis. They have made explicit and precise identifications of the creatures they believe to be at the bottom of eyewitness reports, have given them their own scientific names, have allocated these hypothetical creatures specific positions on the tree of life, have placed them within an ecological context, *and* have given them their own evolutionary histories.

If we're going to take seriously the idea that some mystery animal reports describe genuine undiscovered animals, a bit of speculation is forgivable and even necessary. In the vast majority of cases, however, things have gone way too far. We aren't sure that these creatures exist in the first place, so giving them names and concocting evolutionary scenarios for them is more science fiction than science.

There are many excellent examples of this over-confident 'creature building'. One of my favourites concerns the Dingonek, a tusked, predatory water monster, 5-6m (16-20ft) long and said to inhabit river systems across tropical Africa. Supposedly, it goes by many local names, an assumption being that the many entities concerned refer to the same animal (a big assumption and almost certainly an erroneous one). Based on details reported by witnesses and the ethnic people who 'know' this creature, Heuvelmans proposed that the Dingonek might be a modern-day, aquatic sabretoothed cat. He reasoned that sabretooths might have survived to the present by adopting lifestyles where they could avoid competition with conical-toothed cats (lions, leopards and so on), gigantic feline 'jungle walruses' being the result. Make no mistake, this is speculative zoology *at its finest*. Likewise for various of the hypothetical sea monsters and other cryptids that Heuvelmans invented, often with the input of his friend and colleague Ivan T Sanderson.

Heuvelmans and Sanderson are revered and admired by cryptozoologists and their conclusions are widely adopted. Partly this is because they've been regarded as scientific gurus who came to consider cryptozoological

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problems only after they'd become qualified and experienced in staid, technical zoology. In fact, both were very much outside the sphere of scientific research, and committed to popularisation and cryptozoology. There's nothing wrong with that, but what people seem to ignore is that material written to sell books and magazine articles is very different in scope and content from material designed for the technical literature – it needs to be entertaining, even sensational and dramatic, and is not constrained by a reliance on evidence in the same way that scientific hypotheses are.

In the end, Heuvelmans and Sanderson were brilliant, experienced, and intelligent, but their contributions to the literature have to be seen within the context of speculative zoology, not as science or even scientific writing. And to those who say that Heuvelmans and Sanderson weren't meant to be "doing science" anyway: *wrong*. Heuvelmans specifically said that cryptozoology was about the formulation of hypotheses, that it involved the collation of data, and that it was subject to self-correction, verification and falsification.[7] Cryptozoology *is* a science, even though it overlaps other areas of study (like ethnobiology and anthropology) and even if some of its proponents practise pseudoscience, are more interested in folklore or the collection of anecdotes, or have an anti-scientific agenda.

Anyway, if cryptozoologists can take reports of mystery creatures and weave them into a detailed biological, evolutionary and ecological narrative, can people versed in the ways of speculative zoology do likewise? Yes they can; and this is exactly what we set out to do in *Cryptozoologicon* – merging a speculative treatment with heavy scepticism, rebranding the creature-building component of cryptozoology as speculative zoology, and 'out-sciencing' some of the speculations of the cryptozoological literature.

Creatures covered include classics like Bigfoot, Yeti, Chupacabra, Bunyip and Waitoreke as well as more obscure ones like the Dingonek, Ahool and Mbielu-Mbielu-Mbielu. Our choice of creatures was based wholly on which ones we wanted to illustrate and write about. The aim was never to discredit or mock cryptozoology. I personally think that attempts to do so look lazy and intellectually unsatisfying, in part because you can't smear all cryptozoological research efforts with the same proverbial brush, nor

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ABOVE: The idea that the Dingonek evolved from sabre-toothed cats is partly based on an ancient piece of rock art. But that rock art shows a series of mythical monsters and is not meant to be zoologically accurate.

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do all practitioners of cryptozoology employ the same lack of rigour or dunderheadedness. Rather, our aim was to point to the more problematic aspects of the field: pseudoscience, anti-science, naivety, speculations that are too wild to be taken seriously, sloppy research and inane claims.

The speculative sections of our book are sometimes silly and fanciful, moving the book away from the review and discussion present throughout the rest of its text. In part this is because we wrote those sections as if we ourselves were dedicated cryptozoological literalists, over-interpreting meagre anecdotes and angrily ranting about rich, ivory-tower scientists who are too lazy or cowardly to consider the possibility that cryptids might be real. One prolific cryptozoological author with an enormous online presence said that the speculative sections obscured the fact that the book also included serious review and critique. And some others readers also suggested that we would have done better without them.

A majority, however, told us precisely the opposite: they loved the speculative zoology, wanted more of it, and wished that we'd latched on to this and made it the focus of the volume. Annalee Newitz at io9 understood what we'd done, describing the *Cryptozoologicon* as a "complicated merger between speculative fiction and scientific analysis" that provides "both a scientific debunkery as well as an enthusiastic, fictional endorsement of the creature's existence". Oh, that thing that we didn't think anybody would be dumb enough to fall for – you know, the thing where they become aware of our imagineered cryptids and think that we're proposing them as a serious explanation for the cryptid concerned – happened, since one cryptozoologist took time to complain about the concept of *Mbielia*, the gargantuan bichir we 'proposed' as the 'explanation' 'behind' the Congolese Mbielu-Mbielu-Mbielu (bichirs are weird, tropical African fish with numerous dorsal finlets and an overall prehistoric demeanour). But, then, in order to read what we say in the book, you do have to buy it. Sorry about that.

What do we gain by rebooting (part of) cryptozoology as speculative zoology? Nobody's going to sensibly claim that a heavily illustrated, 100-page softback might be revolutionary, but it might be true to say that the *Cryptozoologicon* helps point cryptozoology in the right direction. As is often the case with perspectives that contradict those championed by the main proponents of a field, what we say is not liked or appreciated by some, and ignored by those who think that we're spoiling the fun. And we'll do more of that in volume II, soon to appear. FT

REFERENCES

1 John Conway, CM Kosemen, Darren Naish, *Cryptozoologicon Volume I*. Irregular Books, 2013

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3 Daniel Loxton, Donald Prothero, *Abominable Science!* Columbia University Press, 2013

4 Darren Naish, "Sea serpents, seals and coelacanths: an attempt at a holistic approach to the identity of large aquatic cryptids", *Fortean Studies Volume 7*, 2001, pp. 75-94.

5 See citations in Charles Morgan et al., "Accuracy of eyewitness memory for persons encountered during exposure to highly intense stress", *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 27, 2004, 265-279.

6 John Conway, CM Kosemen, Darren Naish, *All Yesterdays*. Irregular Books, 2013

7 Bernard Heuvelmans, "What is cryptozoology?" *Cryptozoology* 1, 1982, 1-12.